

## The good in all

One of my greatest joys is that of sharing my Dharma faith with the practitioners of other faiths, listening amicably to one another without any desire of converting the other. It is like having a joyful wholesome meal on the same table looking at one another with friendly eyes, and looking into their hearts.

I recall, as a young boy, as soon as I had learned to ride a bicycle and was confident enough to ride on the streets, I cycled around my ancient hometown of Malacca (locally known as Melaka), Malaysia, visiting all the major religious buildings there, quietly exploring their sacred spaces wherever I was allowed access. The ancient town has the region's oldest mosque, oldest Chinese Buddhist temple, and oldest churches.

Malacca (ancient Melaka) is steeped in history. In 1398, Siamese forces from Ayutthaya sacked Majapahit (in Indonesia), and its last king, Parameswara (1344-c 1414), fled to Singapura (modern Singapore),<sup>1</sup> killed the local ruler, and took over power for a brief spell, before having to flee again. In 1402, he arrived in Malacca, where he started a new kingdom, becoming its first sultan. In due course, he converted to Islam, and took the new name of Iskandar ("Alexander") Shah.

In 1511, the Portuguese overran Malacca with their superior armour and guns, and a fleet of merely 18 ships and 1400 men. The Portuguese leader, Afonso d'Albuquerque massacred the local Malay population, but spared the Indians, Chinese, and Burmese (who were foreigners).

In 1641, the Dutch (Protestants), with the help of the sultan of Johor, ousted the Portuguese (Catholics) and conquered Malacca. However, they left Malacca undeveloped, in favour of Batavia (present Jakarta) as a trading-base. In 1824, with the signing of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty, the Dutch ceded Malacca to the British in exchange for Bencoolen (Bengkulu on the southwest coast of Sumatra).

Malacca, as well as the whole of the Malay Peninsula (today part of Malaysia), was for a brief period (1942-45), that is, during World War 2, a part of the Japanese empire. The British returned to continue their rule, but gave independence to Malaya (as it was known then) in 1957.

In 1961, Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore proposed the idea of Malaysia to Tunku Abdul Rahman of Malaya. In 1963, **Malaysia** – comprising Malaya, Singapore, British North Borneo and Sarawak – was formed. On 9 August 1965, Singapore was expelled from Malaysia, and on the same day, the Singapore Parliament met and declared itself an independent republic.

Hence, Malaysia and Singapore share much of a common regional history and culture. The major world religions – various forms of Chinese religions, Buddhism and Christianity, and also Islam, Judaism and Zoroastrianism – the last two are found only in Singapore. And today, we might add a growing number of atheists, humanists, and New Age groups.

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<sup>1</sup> Historically known as Singapura ("lion-city," from Sanskrit *Simha,pura*) founded in 1299, by Sang Nila Utama, a Srivijaya prince from Palembang (in south Sumatra).

As a young boy, I ran around barefoot in the village and beach behind our long old Peranakan house on the coastal Tranquerah Road (“tranquera” is Portuguese for “palisade or fence”), north of the town. Amongst my close friends were Chinese, Malays and Indians, and we often ate in each other’s houses, enjoying Malacca’s delectable range of local food.

We even dropped in to watch the annual Thaipusam fire-walking ceremony in a kovil in the village across the road, and then eagerly sat on the floor with other Hindus for a free vegetarian meal. And once or twice, we each covered our head with a handkerchief for a festival at a local Sikh gurudwar – and, of course, for the free public meal.

At least once, I stood at the portal of the Tranquerah Mosque (the oldest in the region, built in 1728) to watch from a distance the Muslims praying. (Non-Muslims then were not allowed to enter the mosque premises.) My closest friend (and our gang leader) was a Muslim boy named Abu Bakar, who had a Chinese mother, and lived just behind my house.

Once, when I was in Standard 6 (equivalent of Primary 6 in Singapore), during an English language exercise, I wrote a sentence with an Arabic saying, “In all matters, moderation is best,” with its Arabic quote.<sup>2</sup> A Malay Muslim teacher of mine wondered where I found the romanized Arabic quote, “Did you read the Quran?” “It’s from the dictionary,” I replied. At that time, my best friend, the top student of the class, was a Malay Muslim boy, too.

The Catholics in Malacca were persecuted by the Protestant Dutch during the latter’s rule. It was only in 1710 that the St Peter’s Church (the oldest Catholic Church in the region) was built on land donated by a Dutch convert.<sup>3</sup> One Good Friday, in my mid-teens, I visited the Church to witness the ceremony. I recall I was petrified when I saw the procession carrying a life-size statue of the Dead Christ, and the local women, heads covered, sadly and strangely dressed up, for the occasion.

My elder brother was a convert to the Brethren Church (on account of our eldest uncle, who was himself converted by his wife while studying in Hongkong University).<sup>4</sup> I followed my brother to his Gospel Chapel gatherings a few times, but to this day, I don’t recall any helpful teachings, except for some tiresome Gospel singing.

After losing my elder brother to the Christians, my mother tearfully reminded me not to abandon our family traditions, especially to pray for them on their death (a common practice with local traditional Chinese). She would often – especially on festive days – bring me to worship in the Cheng Hoon Teng in the heart of the old town. It was a temple of the “3 Doctrines” (Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism), built in 1645, but inhabited and run by Buddhist priests.

My mother also encouraged me to attend the local Buddhist temple, Seck Kia Eenh, on the next road, to learn some Buddhism. This was the turning-point in my religious

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<sup>2</sup> If my recollection is right, the Arabic quote was *khayr al-umūri awṣaṭuhā*, cited as spoken by the 4<sup>th</sup> caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tarteel>.

<sup>3</sup> This was also possible because of the alliance between the Dutch and the Portuguese in 1703 as a result of the war of the Spanish Succession.

<sup>4</sup> See Reflection, “[Farewell, brother](#),” R236, 2012.

life, when I began to take a deepening interest in Buddhism. As a curious teenage student, I remember being taught the Buddhism of American eclectic monk Suman-galo<sup>5</sup>—a mishmash of the Buddha’s life, very little Buddhist doctrine (no suttas at all), a lot of filial piety stories, an eclectic Sunday puja of Chinese Mahayana chants and Pali parittas. The temple elders piously welcomed “Almighty God” at the very dawn of Vesak! Fortunately, when we had a resident Sinhala Theravada monk, he put an end to this odd practice.

In 1970, I renounced the world to be a Theravada monk, and spent 5 happy years in Wat Srales, Bangkok, learning all I could about Buddhism, Pali and Thai culture. On my return to Malaysia and Singapore, my time was spent mostly teaching Buddhism to the people, and running Dharma courses emphasizing on local Buddhist fellow-ship.

A few times a year, we would have Dharma retreats in various temples and premises in Malaysia and Singapore. We also had retreats in the lodges of Taman Negara (the Malaysian national park). It was a 4-hour long idyllic motorized boat-ride from Kuala Tembeling to Kuala Tahan in the heart of the park.

One of these rides was especially memorable when I (in my Theravada robes) sat at rear of the boat and chatted with a young Malay manning the motors. It was a cordial exchange which began with his asking me what the basic teachings of Buddhism were. While I explained the 5 precepts to him, he enthusiastically replied that they had something similar in Islam, that is, the 5 pillars.

In the early 1990s (soon after I had returned to the lay life), I spent over a year as a Visiting Scholar at the University of California at Berkeley, on the invitation of Prof Lewis Lancaster. I had a really good time learning some academic discipline in research and writing, and meeting some of the world’s best specialists in their fields.

One of the warm memories of my sojourn in Berkeley, besides the hours in the catacomb-like multi-storied libraries, was my regular visits to the Graduate Theological Union (GTU), a delightful interdenominational place of learning with a helpful library, on Holy Hill, north of the campus (Berkeley *is* beautifully hilly).

I also often visited the Institute of Buddhist Studies (Japanese Shin Buddhism) on Durant Avenue. It was a cosy centre where the small-group talks allowed very interactive sessions so beneficial to a curious student of Buddhism (or any religion).

The Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research in Berkeley was located in a small cosy house in a quiet neighbourhood near where I lived. When I visited them and told them of my interest in sutta study, they generously gave me copies of their recently published volumes of sutras from the Taisho Tripiṭaka.

Another lasting memory of Berkeley was my regular visits to the First Congregational Church of Berkeley. The discussion group I joined comprised about a dozen people, mostly women, and I was the only Asian. The group and discussions were friendly: I especially recall we discussed a wide range of things, except the God-idea!

In Berkeley, I also met a Malaysian Jesuit priest, an old friend, studying in the Jesuit School of Theology. He invited me over for a meal and a chat. The meal was very

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<sup>5</sup> On Sumangalo, see Piyasilo, [Charisma in Buddhism](#), Petaling Jaya (Malaysia), 1992h:1-19.

sumptuous and his accommodations comfortable. I remember complimenting him that he was having a better life than the Buddhist monks. He was of course very convivial and diplomatic, and he simply avoided answering any awkward questions from me.

In this connection, I recall that in my “A” level days in Melaka High School (1967-68), Malaysia, my best friend was a local Chinese Methodist Church youth leader. Although we often had open debates, even honest criticisms, of one another’s faith, we were always fast friends – simply because we were the two most religious students in class.

When I first arrived in Berkeley, I stayed in the Berkeley Zen Center for a few days, before moving into the house of a woman Zen priest, Maylie Scott, also a social activist. It was a small wooden two-storey bungalow (earthquake-proof) in south Berkeley on east-west California State Route 13, known locally as Ashby Avenue.

The Vice Abbot of the Berkeley Zen Center, Alan Senauke, introduced me to the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, of which he was then the Executive Director. From Maylie and Alan, I learned firsthand about social activism. Alan also played bluegrass, a kind of lively American folk music and I had occasion to watch him performing in public in a Berkeley park.

These are the converging of stars and crossing of comets in my universe. These are the moments that have instilled in me a great desire to meet spiritually inclined friends, learn new things, and to cultivate a healthy habit of academic discipline in the study of Buddhism, a courageous openness in religiosity, and a wealth of intellectual and spiritual tools with which to present the Buddha’s teachings – and to celebrate life in a Dharma-inspired way – to joyfully see how the Dharma has, in some way, touched others, even if they do not yet know it.

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